

COVER STORY

Bette Steals Hollywood

The Divine Miss M is a movie star at last

The lady knows how to make an entrance. On New Year's Eve, 1972, she was borne onstage at Manhattan's Lincoln Center in a sedan chair with the drapes closed, one leg peeking through to salute the audience; at midnight she returned in a diaper as Baby 1973. She has emerged from a giant mollusk in a Polynesian bikini; walked on in a cunning knee-length frankfurter costume, mustard streaked down her front; raced across the proscenium in a mermaid's spangled fin and a motorized wheelchair; wowed crowds with her renowned mammary-balloon ballet. So what can she do for a 1987 encore? Strut into her hit movie, *Outrageous Fortune*, abuse a defenseless pay phone and insist, "Gimme back my bleepin' quartal!" Hollywood may be far from Broadway, but for Bette Midler it's just another opening, another show.

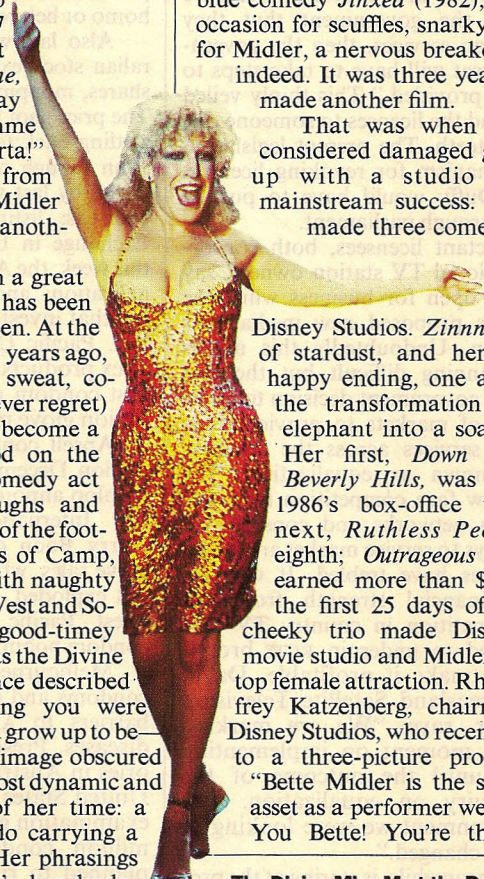
She has always put on a great show, but until recently it has been mostly onstage, not onscreen. At the dawn of her solo career 15 years ago, Bette (rhymes with pet, sweat, coquette and martinet but never regret) declared her intention to become a "legend." She made good on the boast with a song-and-comedy act that elicited raucous laughs and heaving sobs on both sides of the footlights. She was the Callas of Camp, peppering her program with naughty jokes in the spirit of Mae West and Sophie Tucker. Midler's good-timey raunch made her famous as the Divine Miss M, a creature she once described as embodying "everything you were afraid your little girl would grow up to be—and your little boy." The image obscured her rightful claim as the most dynamic and poignant singer-actress of her time: a 5-ft. 1-in. Statue of Libido carrying a torch with a blue flame. Her phrasings were as witty as Streisand's, her dredgings of a tormented soul as profound as Aretha's, her range wider than all comers'.

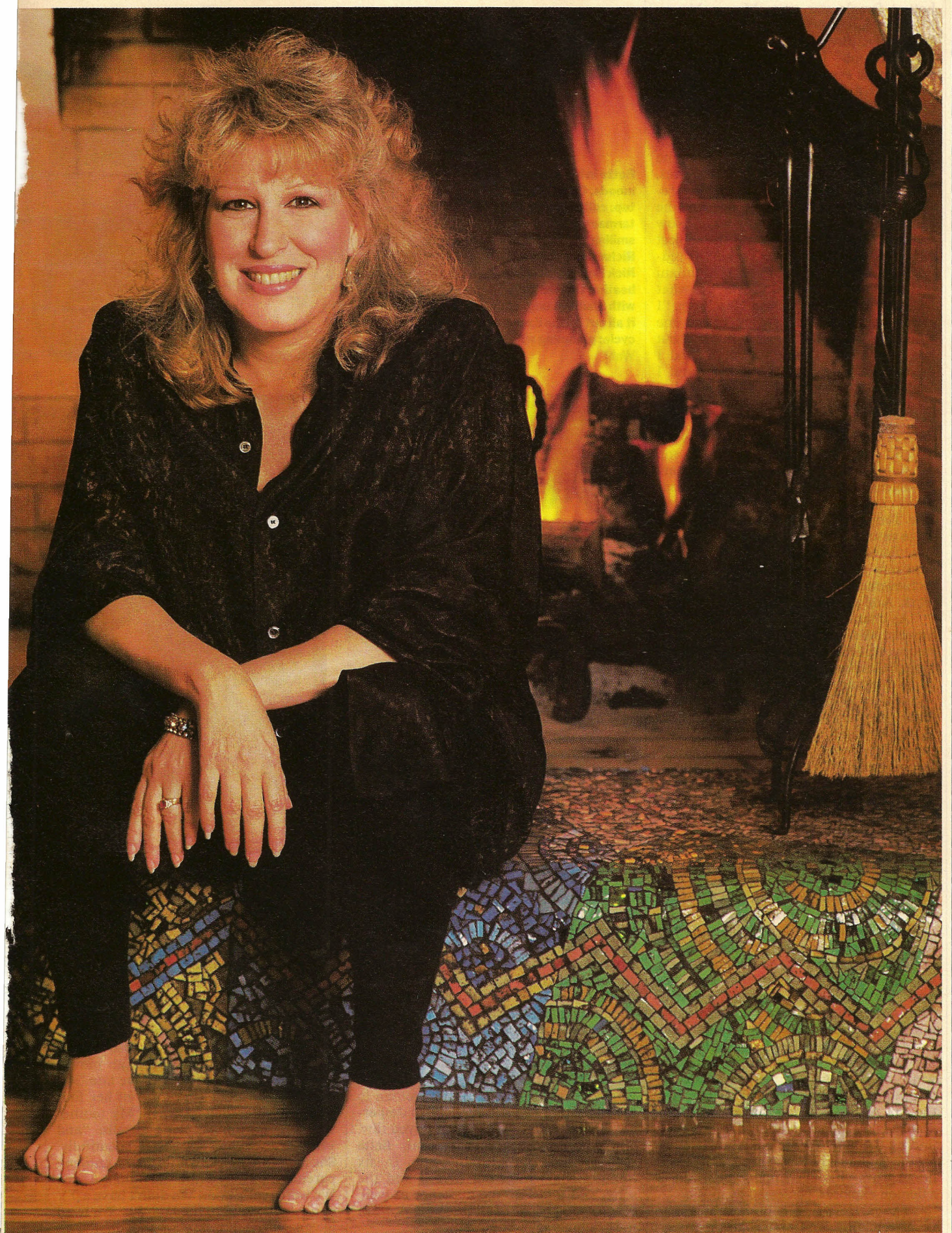
Adulation and awards were never a problem. She copped a Grammy as Best New Artist in 1973. Her 1979 LP, *The Rose*, went platinum. In 1983 she even found a perch on the best-seller lists with her children's book *The Saga of Baby Divine*. But what, these days, becomes a legend most? The one little item that eluded Bette Midler: movie stardom. Her galvanizing turn in *The Rose*, as a soulful thrush on the high wire of drugs, sex and rock 'n' roll, earned the actress raves and an Oscar nomination and . . . precisely no film offers. Her next star role, in the black-and-blue comedy *Jinxed* (1982), provided the occasion for scuffles, snarky reviews and, for Midler, a nervous breakdown. *Jinxed*, indeed. It was three years before she made another film.

That was when a performer considered damaged goods teamed up with a studio aching for mainstream success: Bette Midler made three comedies for Walt

Disney Studios. *Zinnng!* A sprinkle of stardust, and here comes the happy ending, one as unlikely as the transformation of a white elephant into a soaring Dumbo. Her first, *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, was tenth among 1986's box-office winners; the next, *Ruthless People*, ranked eighth; *Outrageous Fortune* has earned more than \$25 million in the first 25 days of release. The cheeky trio made Disney a major movie studio and Midler Hollywood's top female attraction. Rhapsodizes Jeffrey Katzenberg, chairman of Walt Disney Studios, who recently signed her to a three-picture production deal: "Bette Midler is the single greatest asset as a performer we have." *Asset?* You Bette! You're the company's

The Divine Miss M at the Palace theater in Paris, 1978, and the mellow Mrs. Martin von Haselberg in her home above Beverly Hills





hottest female star since Minnie Mouse.

"She has everything she ever wanted," notes Bruce Vilanch, who writes Bette's "Soph" jokes, "things she didn't even realize she wanted and didn't set out to get." Two things, anyway: a doting husband as dotty as she is and a three-month-old daughter. Of Martin von Haselberg, 38, a commodities trader who has cavorted as a performance artist under the name Harry Kipper, Midler declares, "He sees to the heart of things. He respects and supports what I do. And he leads me, too, when I lose my way." Now listen to the new mom, 41, on the subject of Sophie ("not for Sophie Tucker") Frederica ("for my father Fred") Alohilani ("Hawaiian for 'bright sky,' which is what I always wish for her") von Haselberg: "I adore her. Her face swims before me when she's not there, and I think about her before I go to sleep at night and I dream about her, and I wake up and I can't wait to see her." Miss M never delivered two more fervent monologues.

In commemoration of all she has given and, lately, received, the world's top singer-dancer-comedian-songwriter-actress-author-survivor-thriver-dynamo-divinity deserves some special prize. The Tony isn't tony enough. The Nobel Prize wouldn't be noble enough. And so to you, Bette Midler, the academy of your admirers is pleased to present its Life Achievement Award for the body of your work. And the work of your body.

As chanteuse or bawd, in concerts or movies, Midler has put her body to non-stop work. Harnessing the energy of some Rube Goldberg perpetual-motion machine, prancing on those fine filly legs like the winner of the strumpet's marathon, Bette uses her body as an inexhaustible source of sight gags. She shimmies it, twists it, upends it to reveal polka-dot bloomers. In 1978 at the London Palladium she flashed the front of it; at Harvard she exposed the rear. She has made a cottage industry of her buxom bosom. In the 1985 album *Mud Will Be Flung Tonight*, she confesses that she once consulted a postage scale to determine just how heavy her breasts were, and "I won't tell you how much they weigh, but it cost \$87.50 to send 'em to Brazil. Third class."

Such jokes—delivered, as all her slings are, with a great guileless smile—fulfill the tradition of the defiant female wit, alive with innuendo, that stretches from the Wife of Bath to Belle Barth. They also tend to obscure Midler's unique talent. Yes, she coos bedroom ballads like *Long John Blues*; sure, her charts tease five decades of popular music with the wink of parody. But her laser-precise technique is no counterfeit of feeling. It is the art of the Method singer, who approaches a song as an actor does his text: finding the heft of a melodic line, trolling for the truth in a lyric, daring to shift emotional gears without stripping them. She is a demon explorer, possessed by music.

The actress-singer orchestrates her vocal versatility and preternatural empa-

Bette in her many movie moods. Clockwise from top: collapsing on the tarmac with Alan Bates; smiling through with Richard Dreyfuss and Nick Nolte; barely beating the bad guys with Shelley Long; taking it all out on the Exercise-cycle; glooming with Ken Wahl



★ The Rose



★ Jinxed

thy to slip inside the spirit of each song. Performing the title tune from *The Rose*, the lovely mantra of regeneration that has become Bette's *Over the Rainbow*, she sings in her own haunting alto. But she can go seductively nasal for *E Street Shuffle*, chically bonkers for *Twisted*, brassy and clinging for her evocations of the low-biz Songstresses Vicki Eydie and Dolores Delgado. Midler's most powerful number, *Stay with Me* (best heard on the soundtrack album of her 1980 concert film, *Divine Madness*), is the plea of a woman to her departing lover. Her mood is desperate; her sexual pride has been flayed raw. She can only beg and scream. Bette scorches the soul with this one. In six minutes she wrings out herself and the song, and mops up the audience as well. Her cover versions of all these songs make the originals sound like demo tapes.



★ Ruthless People

For once the bromide may be true: you don't learn songs like *Stay with Me*, you have to have lived them. This woman has a right to sing the blues. To hear her story is to find autobiography in every Midler song, and tragedy as the punch line. All that love, drive and desperation in her voice had to come from somewhere. Most of it came from Honolulu.

Fred Midler, a civilian house painter for the Navy, and his wife Ruth moved there from Paterson, N.J., in the late '30s. Ruth named Bette, the third of her four children, after Bette Davis. "My mother was, oh, stunning," Bette recalls, "and very hardworking. She sewed beautifully. She made all our clothes for years, until my parents discovered the Salvation Army. We were really poor. We didn't have a TV or a telephone until the late '50s. We lived in subsidized housing in the middle of



★ Down and Out in Beverly Hills



★ Outrageous Fortune

sugarcane fields." Most of the families in the neighborhood were Samoan, Japanese, Hawaiian, Chinese. Bette's family were the only whites.

"My father was a bit of a tyrant," Bette recalls. "He would flush the girls' makeup down the toilet. He'd lock my sister Susan out of the house when she came home too late. He taught my younger brother Daniel, who is brain damaged, to read and write by hammering and screaming at him until he got it. Every afternoon. None of us wanted to be in the house. But Daniel did learn, and it's made a big difference in his life. It gave him freedom. My father always thought I was a little odd. He never chose to see me perform—except on Johnny Carson. He said I looked like a loose woman. My mother, on the other hand, thought I could do no wrong. One night she sneaked out to see *The Rose*, and she

thought it was wonderful. She died the next year, of liver cancer. She had also had breast cancer, twice. My father died of heart trouble last May. It was too bad. It was just too bad."

Bette adored her older sisters. Susan is a health-care executive in New York City; Daniel lives with her. Judy, the eldest, was a brilliant, unhappy girl. She came to New York and, Bette says, "in 1968, as she was walking along 44th Street, a car came out of a garage and killed her. I was the only family member in town. I had to go to the morgue and identify the body. I don't think my mother ever recovered from the shock. It was a very bad time in our lives."

Ruth was the artistic goad to her girls. She gave them hula lessons and encouraged them to see musicals. Bette's solo de-

but came in first grade: *Silent Night* won her a prize. "After that you couldn't stop me from singing," she says. "I'd sing *Lullaby of Broadway* at the top of my lungs in the tin shower—it had a really good reverb. People used to gather outside to call up requests or yell that I was lousy." When she was twelve, Bette was taken to see her first stage show, *Carousel*. "I couldn't get over how beautiful it was. I fell so in love with it. Everything else in my life receded once I discovered theater, and my mother was all for my starting on this journey and going full speed ahead. When I was the lead in the junior-class play, she brought a bouquet of roses and presented them to me over the footlights."

Seven years later Ruth's girl hit New York City. Right away she met Tom Eyn, author of such plays as *Sarah B. Divine!* and *Who Killed My Bald Sister Sophie?*, and started working for him, soon graduating to dizzy-bimbo leads. From Eyn she learned about camp. From the East Village Soubrette Black-Eyed Susan, she picked up the retro-chic '30s look. She bought an old velvet dress and coat and started singing songs from the period. Busy Bette. By day she was auditioning or scavenging for obscure sheet music (truly obscure to Bette: she couldn't read music). By night she was appearing in the chorus, then as the eldest daughter, in *Fiddler on the Roof*. After the show she would sing at any club that would have her. And every spare moment she would study records of Bessie Smith, Ruth Etting, Libby Holman and Aretha Franklin, the adored elder sisters of Bette's vocal style. And when two bigger clubs—the Improvisation and Continental Baths—called, Miss M was ready to become Divine.

"Originally," she says, "in my velvet dress with my hair pulled back and my eyelashes waxed, I was convinced I was a torch singer. Because the Improv was a comedy club, you had to be a little bit funny, so I added chatter between songs. There I was, singing my ballads and crying the mascara off my eyes, and in the next breath telling whatever lame joke I'd just heard. By the time I got to the Baths, I had 20 minutes of material but needed 50. So I had to wing it. The Baths was gay, gay, gay in a heartfelt way. The guys would check their clothes, get towels and sit on the floor. They thought my show was *fab-ulous*. So eventually the big brassy broad beat the crap out of the little torch singer and took over."

Bette's pianist and arranger was young Barry Manilow, just a few years short of his own, more comfortable stardom. Their first rehearsals were "nothing special, almost dull," as Manilow recalls them. "I played and she sang. But then we did it in front of an audience. She came downstairs in this turban and an outfit that could have come from my grandmother's closet. She was a tornado of energy and talent. I was six feet away, and this vision was one of the thunderbolts in my life." Another fan-mentor, Aaron Russo, signed on as Midler's manager in 1971, while she was still at the Baths, and they briefly were lov-

ers. Their eight-year affiliation was productive and destructive; they were two strong wills making success possible and life miserable. "Aaron began booking me into theaters," Bette says, "and lo and behold, I was a big success. For our first full revue, we had our backup trio, the Harlettes, and a great band and girls in tap-dancing clothes and the jukebox and the mannequins and King Kong. It just blew me away!" Bette was a Broadway star.

But Russo dreamed bigger still. "From the beginning," he says now, "I knew the screen could take this little person with the enormous talent and show her off in a big way." But no project seemed right. So they resurrected *Pearl*, a script about Janis Joplin, and had it rewritten, Midler says, "as a homage to all those men and women who bit the dust from sheer compulsion." That was *The Rose*. "I had a ball! I couldn't wait each day to strap on that angst bag and chew up that scenery. I thought it was my best work." Seen today, *The Rose* looks ragged, with dramatic longueurs randomly interspersed with explosions, but that is part of its surly authenticity. And Midler, deglamourized as Joplin and vulnerable as her own private self, creates a gorgeous image of tenacious stardom as the dying Rose waves away the hands guiding her and, revived by the audience's electricity, propels herself onstage for her last performance.

A European tour following the filming of *The Rose* in 1979 provoked one last fight



Holding Baby Sophie: "I adore her"

with Russo, and Midler was on her own. She chose a jokey *film noir* script called *Jinxed*; she chose the director Don Siegel and her co-star Ken Wahl. The brass at United Artists, then tiptoeing through the rubble of *Heaven's Gate*, was turning to Midler to make decisions. And the creative team, vexed at her power, turned on her. There were shoving matches and walkouts. It was a sorry time. In retrospect, Midler

notes, "I feel I've had my revenge. What goes around comes around." Translation: Siegel's and Wahl's careers have treadmilled, while Bette's has escalated. But Hollywood seemed not to know what to do with its unconventional star. Says *Rose* Director Mark Rydell: "She didn't fail us. The film business failed her."

Bette, better, best—bested. *Jinxed* defeated her; *De Tour* exhausted her. "Bette is easily bruised," says Tour Director Jerry Blatt. "She couples incredible toughness with great softness. You feel she could creak, crumble at any minute." And busted: something like a nervous breakdown ensued. "I couldn't face the world," she recalls. "I slept all day and cried all night. I was drinking to excess. I was miserable." Then, as if in a Hollywood musical (not *The Rose*), love found Bette Midler. "When I was at my lowest point," Bette says, "Harry called me up out of the blue. This was October of 1984, and in two months we were married" (see box).

Harry-Martin has his own unusual saga. His parents fled Germany for South America upon Hitler's accession to power. Martin grew up in Germany and London, went boho in the late '60s and met young Brian Routh at a suburban London drama school. With that meeting, the Kipper Kids were born. In their act, which they have toured, on and mostly off, for 17 years, Martin and Brian play the same character: Harry Kipper, a working-class lad with a big chin. Both Harrys work

Marriage Vegas-Style

It was love at second sight for Bette Midler and her beau, the suave Martin von Haselberg, a.k.a. Harry Kipper. Within two months of their initial date, they were married in a ceremony worthy of the Divine Miss M. Here are the nuptials as Midler described them to TIME Correspondent Denise Worrell:

Harry and I decided on a Monday to get married on a Saturday. And so we did. It was just like that. We drove to Las Vegas and arrived very late at night. Yet there must have been 200 couples in the line for licenses. So we checked into the wedding suite at Caesars Palace and changed clothes. I was wearing a grayish-blue chiffon dress that I had bought for our first formal date together, a movie premiere. It cost a fortune, but I really wanted to impress Harry. And that's what I wore. My dress was very boom-boom—it had strings of beads hanging down—and I made a nice racket walking down the aisle. I wore a pair of silver shoes I'd bought. And I carried a beautiful bouquet. It's dried now and hanging next to a picture of Harry in our bedroom. Yeah, we're sops. We're really soppy.



Blissful in L.A. with Martin

By this time it was 2 o'clock in the morning, and we got our marriage license. We wound up at the Candlelight Wedding Chapel. We put on a sound-track tape of Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits* and walked down the aisle. The fellow started reading the service; it was really quite moving. We both got teary-eyed at the part about the gold ring. At the end the guy said he liked my work—and did I know he was an Elvis impersonator? I said no, I didn't know he was an Elvis impersonator. He told us he was very popular and had recorded some AC music. I explained to Harry that the guy meant Adult Contemporary or Easy Listening, depending on which coast you were on. As we left the chapel, he promised he would send us his single.

We were both terribly nervous. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I looked over at him, and the enormity of it just hit me. I thought, "Oh, my God!" After all, we hardly knew each other. It was quite a shock. The next day we drove home, and there he was in his house. And there I was in my house. We had never lived together. And do you know what happened two days later? It was around Christmastime, and because we'd already planned it, I went to see my father in Honolulu, and he went to see his in Germany. So we didn't really have a honeymoon.